

Gurdwaras In Pakistan - An Overview

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Situation of Sikh Gurdwaras before partition of India in 1947:

The advent of Banda Singh Bahadur was a powerful magnet for the rural people of the Punjab to join the Khalsa Panth; but their wholesale conversion to Sikhism did not affect their existing neighborly relationship with the Muslims. It was the invading forces of the foreigners and their local satraps, with whom the Khalsa waged wars, and ultimately prevailed, that the Sikhs had the conflict. For about a half century of Sikh rule, the Sikhs practised their religion and looked after their sacred places with devotion and dignity. The number of Gurdwaras began to increase throughout the length and breadth of the Punjab. The practices became uniform and were reflective of the real precepts that had been laid down by the Sikh Gurus.

The effect of the creation of SGPC in 1925: The Act of 1925 finally gave the control of the Historic Sikhs Gurdwaras of the Punjab to a representative committee of Sikhs, and it rectified the unsatisfactory situation that was hastening the destruction of the Sikh religious places and principles. The Sikh community at that time had woken up to the realization that, unless it took charge of its own affairs, the sacrifices of its ancestors to propagate and sustain this great religion would have been made in vain. Many prominent institutions came into being, and many

devoted and able Sikhs gave their all to uplift the grass-root Sikhs. The result was spectacular. Malwa, Doaba, Majha and Pothohar produced Sikhs of vision and ability. There was an all-round improvement in the understanding and psyche of the Sikhs that reflected itself in a clear and unadulterated practice of Sikhism.

Situation of Gurdwaras in Pakistan after partition of India: The partition of India had a debilitating and damaging effect on the Sikhs, particularly on those who had established for themselves flourishing farms and businesses. Leaving everything behind, and fleeing to East Punjab was a very painful, traumatic and disheartening experience. Perforce, the sacred places had to be abandoned, and there was nothing that they could do about those. For a half century, the Sikhs have been praying for the opportunity to be granted to them to visit the shrines, sacred to the memory of the Gurus, and to those of the Sikh ancestors who had given their all for the preservation and promotion of the Khalsa Panth. For many decades after the partition of India, the Congress governments held continuous control of the country. When time began to heal the wounds sustained by the partition, the Sikhs began to stir for some kind of an approach to the sacred shrines. Inherently there never has been any rivalry between Sikhism and Islam. The rural population of the Punjab, had no *causa belli* with their neighbors before the advent of Islam in 1001 AD. Although they saw some of those neighbors convert to Islam after that, they still remained friendly and co-operative neighbors. The alien rule of the British and their "divide and rule" policy brought about certain slackness in their devotion to the Sikh Code of religious and social

ethics. This trend was, however, arrested and slowly reversed after the creation of the S.G.P.C in 1925.

Status of Sikh Gurdwaras in countries that became independent of Colonial Rule:

- a. China: The advent of Communism drove all religions out of the country. The flourishing Sikh Gurdwaras, for example, in Shanghai were abandoned, there was no Sangat for these.
- b. Fiji: The racial prejudice against non-Fijians inhibited and cramped the growth and practice of Sikhism.
- c. East Africa: The professional and business opportunities for Asians were severely curtailed and, for political reasons, large numbers of people emigrated to UK or India. The reduced Sikh population made many Gurdwaras redundant.

The effect on Sikh Gurdwaras of the division of post-1947 Punjab: Unlike the partition of India, the dismemberment of the Punjab into the States of Haryana and Himachal Pardesh, did not involve a movement of populations. It however, put a brake on the expansion of the Sikh religion in these areas.

Status of Takhts: When the SGPC was created in 1925, it was charged with the functioning and upkeep of the Historic Gurdwaras of the Punjab (as it was then). Thus, the Gurdwaras of Punjab, in what later became "Pakistan", Haryana" and "Himachal Pardesh" were subject to the jurisdiction of SGPC. As Pakistan was born

as a sovereign Islamic republic, the jurisdiction of the SGPC over the historic Sikh Gurdwaras in the West Punjab ceased. The Sikhs could have access to these sacred places only in the manner - and to the extent - that the Pakistan government permitted.

The position of the Gurdwaras in Haryana and Himachal Pardesh is, however, different. These two states being an integral part of India, the jurisdiction of SGPC over the Sikh Historic Gurdwaras there has continued. Of the three Takhts in the Punjab, namely, Sri Akal Takht Sahib, Sri Kesgarh Sahib, and Sri Dam-Dama Sahib, the first two were included in the 1925 Act, but the Central Government left the inclusion of Dam Dama Sahib in abeyance. On the Baisakhi tercentenary celebrations this year, it has at last been included. Now the legal status of these three Takhts is equal.

The Gurdwaras of Delhi are within the jurisdiction of DSGPC created by a parochial Act for the purpose.

The Takhts, Sri Patna Sahib and Takht Sri Hazoor Sahib are made subject to the laws of Bihar and Maharashtra, respectively. The satellite Gurdwaras of these Takhts are included in the jurisdiction of the Committees appointed thereunder.

As Pakistan is a sovereign country, and the Laws of India cannot apply to it extra-territorially, by establishing its own PGPC, the Pakistan government is mirroring the jurisdictional legislations of India. No exception can, therefore, be taken by anyone for this creation that is

applicable to the Sikh Gurdwaras within its realm and for giving their control to its Sikh citizens.

Present situation of Sikh Gurdwaras in Pakistan:

Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, has satellite Gurdwaras like Bal Lila, Gurdwara Patti Sahib, Gurdwara Maalji Sahib, Gurdwara Kiara Sahib, Gurdwara Tamboo Sahib, as well as the Gurdwaras of Guru Arjan Devji and Guru Har Gobind Sahib, and Gurdwara Nihang Singhan, etc. In Choochar Kanna, the Gurdwara Sacha Sauda. In Lahore, Gurdwara Shahid Ganj, Dehra Sahib, as well as Gurdwara Guru Nanak Garh, Guru Ramdas Dharamsala, Gurdwara Diwan Khana, and Baoli Sahib. Gurdwara Shikar Garh of Guru Hargobind Sahib, Gurdwara Bhai Budhu da Ava, Gurdwara Lall Khooh, Gurdwara Shahid Ganj of Bhai Mani Singh and Shahid Ganj of Bhai Taroo Singh. Apart from the Dera Sahib Gurdwara in Lahore, and the Nankana Sahib and its satellite Gurdwaras, the others are neglected and are deteriorating daily. There is very little local Sangat, but Punjabi and overseas Sikhs visit these on their travels to Pakistan.

Kartarpur Sahib (the place of demise of Guru Nanak): This Gurdwara, by virtue of its eminence, should be the focus of every visiting Sikh, but it is a sad fact that it is the least visited shrine. Over the years the Gurdwara building is now in ruins. S.G.P.C. has totally neglected it.

Panja Sahib: This Gurdwara has space and scenery. It is well visited by overseas Sikhs, and by the Jathas led by S.G.P.C. It is well guarded by the Pakistan security and

it is in a healthy state of preservation. There is no local Sangat, but there are Resident Granthis.

Other Gurdwaras like Bhai Lallo's in Eminabad, and those in and around West Punjab, North West Frontier Province, Baluchistan and Sind. Except for Bhai Lallo's, the others are boarded up. There are no local Sangats, except in Peshawar.

The ability of SGPC to oversee the West Punjab Gurdwaras: In fairness to S.G.P.C. it can be said, without much fear of contradiction, that the role of the S.G.P.C. has been limited to Nankana Sahib and Panja Sahib, and that too towards collecting the "Charhava" and other receivables from the Sikhs accompanying the Jathas. The financial and practical assistance of S.G.P.C. to the Gurdwaras visited has been minimal.

The effect of reduction in populations on the condition of Sikh Gurdwaras:

- a. Gurdwaras in Shangai were abandoned in haste, and there is no prospect of there being any Sikh Sangat in Shanghai in the foreseeable future.
- b. The prohibition on the establishment of Gurdwaras in Muslim countries (like, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait) is well known. There is no likelihood of the policy being ever relaxed. The Sikh community has learnt to live with the situation, unsatisfactory though it.

The effect of the Creation of the Pakistan Gurdwara Parbhandak Committee (PGPC):

- a. Situation of the Sikh Gurdwaras in Pakistan in 1999. These fall under the category of "Evacuee Property" and are, under the control of the Waqf Board. Only certain Gurdwaras, as are regularly visited by foreign Sikhs and SGPC Jathas are looked after. The others are almost neglected. Waqf Board is not a suitable body for the care and reverence of these shrines.
- b. The present change in the policy of Pakistan will result in transferring the control of the Gurdwaras to the local Sikh community. The Gurdwaras and the properties attached to these will no longer be of an "Evacuee" status.

It will be recalled that the Home Ministers of India and Pakistan signed an agreement in 1953 which facilitated the setting up of two boards in the two countries, concerning this evacuee aspect. That action was patently wrong, especially when the Independence Act did not visualize its adoption. The Sikhs have struggled for long, and, in our prayers, we seek: "Gurdhama de khule darshan didar atey sewa sambhal". That has now been granted, and the Sikhs all over the world should thank Waheguru for His Grace.

As a direct result of the transfer of control to PGPC, the Sikhs now have a responsible role to play. First, the Gurdwaras would not be controlled by the Pakistan Waqf Board. There are some 700 Sikh families in Pakistan, who were until now not free to visit the shrines, much less to manage these. They would now form a committee. This committee would have representatives from other countries, like the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, and even India. The criteria would be a friendly and co-

operative attitude towards Pakistan and its people; the genuine desire to encourage the fulfillment of the object of the progress and welfare of the Gurdwaras, and preservation of the Sikh religion and its traditions. The Jathedars of the five Takhts in India would have one representative each on the Committee. It would, therefore, have a wider acceptance than that of the SGPC. While the overseas Sikhs would be able to visit the Pakistan Gurdwaras at any time, any Sikh from India could also come to the Wagah border, and get a visa to visit the Gurdwaras for a fortnight throughout the year. Under the present arrangement, a fixed number of Sikhs can visit the Gurdwaras only during the Gurburabs. Now that Sikhs all over the world would have free year-long access to our holy shrines, it can only be deemed to be an important achievement.

General Nasir is the chairman of the Pakistan Waqf Board and, by virtue of that position, he is heading the PGPC. But this is just a temporary arrangement. When a new committee is formed by the Pakistani Sikhs and others, no one but a Sikh shall be its head. It would be a democratic institution, and its functions would fully conform to Sikh traditions, to operate on the same pattern as the SGPC. It should be remembered that under the 1925 Act, Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar presides over every first meeting of the general house of the SGPC; and he may be a Sikh, Muslim, Hindu or a Christian. General Nasir's position on the PGPC is similar.

c. How effective have been the Jathas of SGPC in post-1947 period; During the Congress government period, being a secular institution, it was unsympathetic towards

the visits of the Sikhs to their shrines in Pakistan. Their governments ruled India for decades. They kept the number of Sikh visitors down to a few hundred per Jatha, and included security and spy personnel. Much misery, disappointment was suffered by genuine devotees. During the BJP government period, as the Akalis were partners in the government at the Centre and in the Punjab, the BJP government allowed Jathas by the thousand. The role of SGPC has clearly been limited to a few visits, and congregations in a year, mainly Nankana Sahib, Dera Sahib and Panja Sahib. It has not been able to improve its relationship with Pakistan or its people. SGPC's role has been circumscribed by the politics of India rather than by the necessity to propagate the religion of Guru Nanak, as its top priority. The maintenance of the remaining Gurdwaras in Pakistan has been totally neglected. SGPC does not spend any funds of its own on repair and maintenance of the Gurdwaras, nor can it suggest ways and means for the recovery of maximum possible revenue from Gurdwara lands and properties.

Pakistan, being a sovereign country, based on Sharia law, has hitherto deemed the Sikh Gurdwaras as "Evacuee" property. As such, the Sikh Gurdwaras came under the control of the Waqf Board. Many Gurdwaras have landed property attached to them, but the revenue to be drawn from such properties were totally under the discretionary control of the Waqf Board. The result has been that the income has been meagre. There were no SGPC guidelines for its betterment. It is a fact, for example, that in 1979 to 1981, there was a fulltime gardener who looked after the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara and tended the garden and the well in its immediate

vicinity. When in 1982, the incumbent gardener died, the Waqf Board took no steps to replace him. The SGPC never took any notice of the deteriorating state of that shrine. It is a fact well known to SGPC that, in the course of its pre-1947 history, the building had been refurbished at the cost of the Maharaja of Patiala. Similar fate of neglect and inaction, resulting in destruction, fell on other smaller Gurdwaras in West Punjab. In solitary instances, individual Sikhs took the initiative (for personal reasons) to improve the condition of some of the buildings for which they have had particular empathy, for example, Bhai Lallo's well in Eminabad was repaired and the Gurdwara refurbished by a Sikh family from overseas.

What next? The heart of any Sikh, who has to utter these sentiments, fills with grief, but it has to be recorded that, bearing in mind the pitiable and self-destructive activities of the Sikh leadership in India, it is foolish to expect any credible initiative from them.

The SGPC must understand that one of its functions is to ensure the sustained propagation of the Sikh religion. The criticism, by SGPC, of the Pakistan Government, and the threatening not to send Jathas to Pakistan as a protest against the creation of PGPC, is an example of lack of appreciating reality. The Pakistan Government, like the Government of China, have no obligation to maintain an alien religion in their country. Upto now, SGPC and the Sikh leadership in India have proved themselves to be totally powerless to exert any influence on the Pakistan Government. They could have done so by spending time, money and effort, in the structural maintenance of the Gurdwaras, and by maintaining a liaison with the Pakistani

Sikhs. This latter neglect resulted in there being no local Sangats in that country to attend at those Gurdwaras. Now that the Pakistan Government has taken the initiative to hand over the management of the historic Sikh Gurdwaras in Pakistan to the Sikhs, it is foolish to expect that that government would let into its country foreign nationals who have an in-built prejudices. The Pakistan Government deserves to be congratulated, for handing over the management of the Sikh Gurdwaras to its Sikh citizens. The criticism of the Sikh leadership in India about the head of the PGPC being a retired army general, is again futile and unwarranted. The critics forget that when the British created the SGPC under the 1925 Act, they laid it down that, at the inaugural meeting of the house, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar would be the Chairman. From time to time the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar may be a Hindu, Sikh, Christian or a Muslim. This kind of criticism amounts to a pot calling the kettle "black".

To be realistic, the Sikhs throughout the world should appreciate that it is in their best interests that as many Sikh Gurdwaras as possible in West Punjab should be well maintained and functioning according to the Sikh traditions. This would entail collection of funds, provision of qualified and suitable Sikh preachers. It is well known that the present population of Sikhs in Pakistan is very small and, within their numbers, there are very few persons of good preacher quality. The best action that the Sikhs could take in the present circumstance is:

- a. To appreciate the goodwill that is reflected in the initiative of the Pakistan Government through its offer to give the Sikhs the control of their Gurdwaras;

b. Take advantage of the establishment of PGPC as a first step towards taking the responsibility of maintenance of Gurdwaras, and ensuring the regular function of these according to our traditions;

c. It is imperative that a few dozen Sikhs of an open outlook and friendly disposition towards the Pakistan Government and its people, should put their heads together, and raise funds, make plans, and find ways and means of inducing the best brains in the community to put life into the buildings and institutions that are so sacred and dear to our hearts. Throwing brickbats on the Pakistan Government, and on those Sikhs who have encouraged that Government and its people to show goodwill towards the Sikh religion, is totally out of place. Let us hope that the divergent political interests and the unfriendly slogans that are being displayed in Pakistan and India shall be eliminated forthwith, and the object of raising the status of birthplace of Guru Nanak from an "evacuee property" to the Vatican of the Sikh religion, be given a sustained and urgent priority.